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MLA PROFICIENCY TESTS--POSSIBILITIES FOR FUTURE USES.

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THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION PROFICIENCY TESTS PROVIDE THE NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION WITH AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF JUDGING THE COMPETENCY OF POTENTIAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS WHO MAY LACK COLLEGE CREDIT OR WHO HAVE FOREIGN DEGREES. ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL, THESE TESTS CAN HELP RAISE THE LEVEL OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION BY SETTING MINIMUM COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS FOR THOSE IN TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS, PROVIDING STATES WITH A BASIS FOR ESTABLISHING MINIMUM COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS FOR CERTIFICATION, SERVING AS A BASIS FOR AWARDING ADVANCED PLACEMENT AND CREDIT IN COLLEGE, AND ENCOURAGING GREATER INDEPENDENT STUDY AND USE OF AUTOINSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES. (SS)

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MLA Proficiency Tests: Possibilities for Future Uses

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I will start this paper with a use which is still in the future for most states but is, we can say proudly, already in the past (as well as in the future) for New York State.

Last Spring as a first step in its new College Proficiency Examination Program, the New York State Education Department gave the MLA Proficiency Tests to 127 candidates who were interested in teacher certification. Nearly all were foreign born and had foreign degrees. Although many might previously have sought to teach their native languages in the public schools, they had the misfortune of being without college credits in language. Since certification requires credits as evidence of proficiency, there was no ready way for these people to make their skills available. It was to overcome just such an artificial obstacle that the Heald Committee on Higher Education in New York and the Board of Regents in 1960 recommended the establishment of a proficiency examination program.

The program is now in being and the State Education Department has agreed to accept satisfactory performance on examinations in lieu of specific course credits for people who already have a college degree and wish to complete requirements for certification.

To set the level for satisfactory performance in the first administration of the MLA tests, the Department decided to use for provisional certification (24 hours of language) the means of scores achieved by all teachers on tests taken at the beginning of NDEA 1962 summer institutes. To satisfy permanent certification requirements (39 hours of language, including 15 in advanced courses) scores on the four skills tests one standard deviation above the means were used.

On this basis, 41 of the 127 candidates passed all seven parts of the tests, 34 at the permanent level. 72 others passed the four skills tests only, but 66 of these were at the permanent level! The means of the candidates on most of the skills tests were 1½ standard deviations above the means of the summer institute people, all of whom, please note, were certified to teach and had been teaching somewhere in this country.

Already over 75 of the candidates who had not previously applied for certification have done so, 16 others were already applicants when the tests were announced. Eight have been certified and the rest, we hope, are working now to complete requirements in professional education or other areas.

Thus one future use of the MLA Proficiency Tests will be to open a path to language teaching for persons with native or near native language ability who could not otherwise meet certification requirements.

A closely related use will be to enable colleges with language teacher training programs to measure the achievement of students before recommending them to the State for certification. Students who learn languages easily can then meet the minimum competency requirements more quickly and go on to more advanced language study, and all students can be held to a minimum level of achievement no matter how many hours of

credit they may earn.

It is also possible that colleges may wish to use the examinations as part of the requirements for all students majoring in foreign languages.

The preceding uses fall easily within the framework of present practice in most states. Another use, which would constitute a significant change, would be to require that all applicants for certification to teach a foreign language pass a language proficiency test. This idea has the enthusiastic support of many people interested in raising the quality of language instruction in the schools. Endorsement of the idea by the profession through the MLA and other organizations would certainly hasten the adoption of such a procedure by the states.

One of the major purposes of the New York College Proficiency Examination Program is to enable individuals to earn college credit for knowledge gained outside of regular college classes. We hope the language examinations will be used for this purpose as well. Here we look forward to the availability of the MLA Cooperative Foreign Language Tests for grades 7 through 14 to supplement the advanced examinations.

These examinations should at least make possible far more effective placement of students at appropriate levels of instruction. Whether they will also be used as a basis for awarding credit remains to be seen. Although examinations for placement are used more extensively, perhaps, in language than in any other field, there is great reluctance to recognize achievement with credit. The feeling seems to be that unless one has "sweated" out language in a class it does not "count". Whether it should count or not, and, if so, to what extent is a matter which should be explored by the profession. Could the MLA suggest a policy

to guide institutions in determining when they should grant credit and not merely placement for language skill acquired outside of formal classes?

One consequence of a generous attitude on credit may be to encourage more people to study on their own. Techniques for teaching basic language skills through self-instructional procedures has been carried, I believe, quite far. The availability of suitable instructional programs coupled with proficiency examinations, particularly when used as a basis for awarding credit, may do much to stimulate greater independent study of language.

Is it too much to hope that in time much of the introductory language instruction, especially for mature students, will be done outside of classes with the aid of tapes, computers and other new media? This may be the only way to free sufficient teachers to meet the needs at more advanced levels of instruction and in more exotic languages.

This development too would free students to proceed at their own pace. The quick learner could move further in a given time and many slower learners who do not get very far in the traditional classroom might be enabled to acquire greater language skills. In any such arrangement sound and readily available proficiency examinations would be essential.

In summary, among the possible future uses of the MLA Proficiency Tests are:

1. To enable individuals with native or near native language ability to meet teacher certification requirements
2. To provide teacher training programs in colleges with a basis for setting minimum competency requirements

3. To provide states with a basis for setting minimum competency requirements for certification
4. To serve as a basis for awarding advanced placement and credit in college
5. To encourage greater independent study and utilization of self-instructional procedures for language instruction.